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SUBJECT: BRUNEI VIEWS ON MIDEAST ISSUES

REF: A. STATE 3592
[1](#)B. STATE 19372
[1](#)C. STATE 14071

Classified By: Ambassador Emil Skodon for reasons 1.4 (B,D)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: The Government of Brunei (GOB) appears to be viewing Mideast issues increasingly through the prism of a broader Sunni-Shia divide. Over the course of a long conversation with Dato Shofry, the Acting Head of the GOB external intelligence service, Shofry expressed concern about increasing Iranian influence reaching as far as Southeast Asia. He said the GOB was worried about prospects for Iraq becoming a training ground for international terrorists, and warned that if the USG pulls out of Iraq it will likely be abandoned by the rest of the international community as well. The GOB is encouraged by the Secretary's active engagement in the Middle East Peace Process, which besides advancing the cause of peace helps to counter negative views of the U.S. among the world's Muslims. Shofry made a strong pitch for encouraging more students from Muslim-majority countries to study in the U.S., as the best long-term investment we could make in the future of U.S. relations with the Islamic world. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (SBU) A range of Mideast-related issues were among the topics I covered in a February 13 one-on-one lunch with Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) Permanent Secretary Dato Shofry bin Abd Ghafor. Shofry, who spent many

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years in New York as Brunei's UN Permrep, is currently dual-hatted as the Acting Head of the GOB external intelligence service, the MFAT External Research Bureau. In that role he is responsible for overseeing the preparation of briefings on foreign policy issues for the Sultan, Crown Prince, Foreign Minister, and other top GOB officials.

IRAQ

[1](#)3. (C) Drawing on ref A and other sources, I summarized for Shofry the new Iraq strategy announced by the President in January and its progress to date. He commented that the GOB understood the rationale behind the "surge strategy," particularly its non-military elements of bolstering moderate political leaders and improving economic conditions. Brunei hoped our new approach would be successful, as the GOB was worried about Iraq becoming a training ground for terrorists who would eventually expand their operations beyond its borders. Shofry was, however, unsure whether depending on the Iraqis to take responsibility for their own future constituted "a policy or a hope," given that the divisions within Iraqi society appeared increasingly intractable and its leaders incapable of bridging those differences.

14. (C) Shofry quizzed me about the likelihood that calls from the U.S. Congress for a phased troop withdrawal would result in the adoption of a mandatory timetable. After I explained why the President was averse to announcing a definitive pre-determined drawdown schedule, Shofry warned "If you go, everyone goes." He doubted that any members of the coalition would remain committed to Iraq in a meaningful way absent a strong U.S. military presence, and commented "They are there because they care about the U.S., not because they care about Iraq." Shofry also implied that prospects were dim for a multinational force drawn from Muslim countries to take the place of the current coalition, given widespread pessimism about Iraq's internal security. In short, Shofry said, once the U.S. was gone from Iraq the world would no longer care about the Iraqis -- not necessarily a bad thing, he mused, since it might force the Iraqis to face up to their problems and take action to find solutions.

IRAN

15. (C) I told Shofry that there was at least one country that would not lose interest in Iraq and would, in fact, seek to fill the void if the international community pulled out. That country was Iran. Shofry acknowledged the threat of more Iranian intervention in Iraq, and said Teheran's apparent drive to play more of a leadership role in the Muslim world was deeply worrying for Brunei. He was concerned that an increasingly hostile divide between Sunnis and Shia in the Middle East could spill over into Southeast Asia and lead to instability here.

16. (C) I expressed some surprise at this, given the preponderance of moderate Sunnis among Southeast Asian

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Muslims. Shofry maintained that Shia influence (a term he used interchangeably with "Iranian influence") was growing in the region. This was due to Teheran's sponsorship of study by young Southeast Asians in Qom and other Iranian religious centers, its backing for Iranian-trained Islamic teachers in Southeast Asia, and its appeal to young Muslims who admired the outspoken way Iran unabashedly championed the cause of Islam and "stood up" to the West. Shofry said there were no practicing Shia among Bruneians, but the growing number in neighboring countries was a worry to the GOB. He claimed that 15 million Indonesians were either Shiites or close Iranian sympathizers. When I asked where he had gotten that number, Shofry replied that this was what the GOB had been told by "our friends" (a reference to the external services of other ASEAN countries).

17. (C) Drawing on refs B and C and other sources, I briefed Shofry on USG policy toward Iran and urged the GOB to ensure that it was adhering to the terms of UNSCR 1737. He replied that the GOB took seriously its responsibility to adhere to UNSCR decisions, including this one, and would take the necessary steps to enforce its applicable provisions. Shofry urged the USG to calibrate carefully its strategy regarding Iran's nuclear program. He warned that the Iranian population would "circle the wagons" and rally around its leaders if it came to believe that western powers were only interested in placing pressure on the regime and were not offering constructive alternatives to Iran's current, suspect nuclear energy program.

MEPP AND U.S. RELATIONS WITH ISLAMIC WORLD

18. (C) Shofry said the GOB was encouraged by Secretary Rice's active personal reengagement in the Middle East peace process. Besides the obvious advantage of raising hopes for

a lasting settlement between the Palestinians and Israelis, public engagement in the peace process was the single most important step the USG could take to improve its popular standing in the Islamic world and counter the widespread view that the Global War on Terror was a cover for a Global War on Muslims.

¶9. (C) In reply to my question about other measures the USG could take to improve relations with Muslim-majority countries, Shofry commented that much of the problem was due to Muslims identifying America only with the policies of the current Administration; rightly or wrongly, most Muslims saw those policies in a negative light, and from there it was only a short intellectual leap to being negative about America itself. In his view, the USG should offer vastly more support for people-to-people exchanges, so Muslims could learn first-hand that there was much more to the U.S. than the policies of any given Administration.

¶10. (SBU) I pointed out that in the last year the USG had sponsored nearly fifty Bruneians for foreign trips to interact with American counterparts, either to the U.S. or to the International Law Enforcement Academy in Bangkok. Shofry acknowledged the usefulness of such short-term programs, but thought the real bang-for-the-buck lie in encouraging more Muslim students to pursue higher education in the U.S. He made a strong pitch for education fairs and other promotional activities by American universities to attract Bruneian students, arguing that anyone who lived among the warm and generous population of the United States for a period of years might continue to oppose USG policies, but would be highly unlikely to harbor hatred for the country itself.

COMMENT

¶11. (C) The normally soft-spoken Shofry's visceral concern about the implications of a growing and increasingly violent Sunni-Shia divide was striking, especially given that Brunei appears so far removed from the effects of this schism (the constitution of Brunei defines its state religion as "Islam according to the Shafeite sect," i.e., one of the main Sunni schools of Islamic law). Equally striking was the manner in which he used the terms "Shia" and "Iranian" interchangeably, leaving little doubt that he saw Teheran as the aspiring head of the Shia world. The GOB's traditional preference for conciliation and the need to avoid any appearance of taking sides against a fellow Muslim country will preclude it from taking an active role in pressuring Iran, but Shofry's comments leave little doubt that the GOB is concerned about the potential spread of Iranian prestige and influence. End Comment.
SKODON